Thorns and Roses in Queer Letters That Flood Authors' Mail

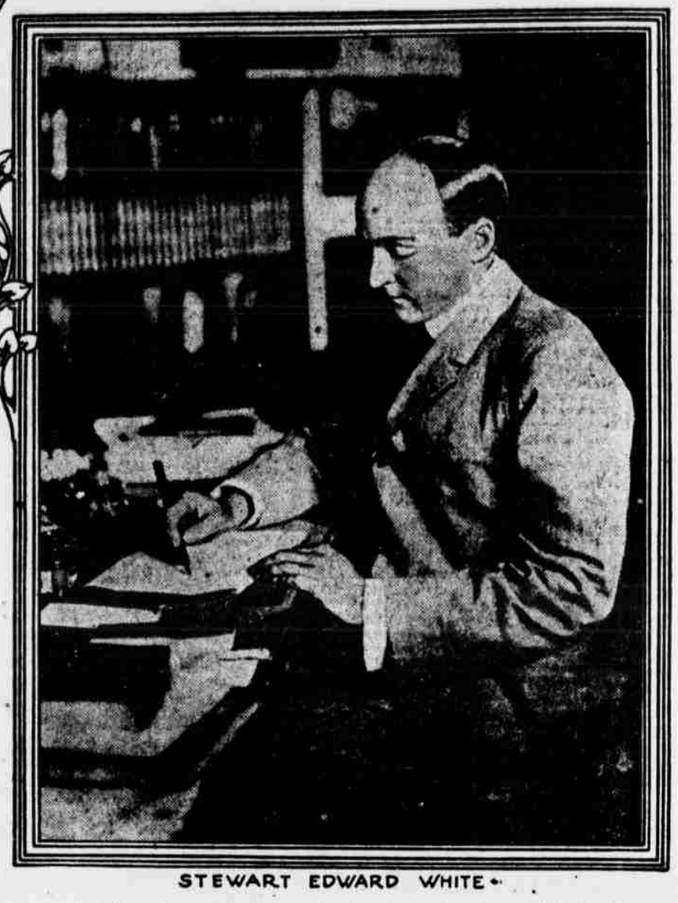
"Uncle Tom's Cabin" Ranks First Among American Books in Stirring Up Tempest, Bringing Both Praise and Abuse

By ARTHUR B. MAURICE.

GEORGE BARR McCUTCHEON

HEAD of BALZAC By RODIN

CAROLYN WELLS



STEWART EDWARD WHITE

EDWIN LEFEVRE

At once a penalty and a privilege of successful authorship is the variety and eccentricity of the mail that the postman brings. The letters written by strangers to the man conspicuous in other lines of activity have reference merely to his own personality, or his own actions or utterances; those directed to the author who has won popularity involve also the personalities and actions and utterances of his characters. At times an excuse for writing has been found before the first paragraph of actual text.

The original dedication of Gen. Lew Wallace's "Ben Hur" read, "To the Wife of My Youth." It was widely interpreted as a reference to one who had passed away, and the interpretation resulted in such a deluge of letters of sympathy, some of them thinly veiling half proposals of marriage from women matrimonially disposed, that in later editions of the book Gen. Wallace found it expedient to change the dedication to read, "To the Wife of My Youth, Who Still Abides with Me."

Tempest Over 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.'

Although written in a day when letters were less frequent, though of greater individual length, probably no book of American origin ever brought its author such a flood of correspondence as "Uncle Tom's Cabin."

All the fire of the South welled up in the epistles of denunciation from those of slave holding proclivities directed at the little New England woman. The tone of these letters was balanced by the volume of laudatory correspondence from high strung Abolitionists. Every character in the book, Uncle Tom, Topsy, Little Eva, and above all Simon Legree, was furiously extolled or abused, according to the convictions or prejudices of the writer.

Not his expressed opinions on the slavery question, though on that subject he held ideas as radical as those of Harriet Beecher Stowe herself, but his public utterances on the matter of international copyright, emptied a mail bag of letters at the door of Charles Dickens. These letters, for the most part anonymous, informed the Englishman in no uncertain terms that he "was no gentleman," that he was "a mere mercenary scoundrel," that his motives for visiting the United States were "of the basest nature." And all those communications, whether signed or not, ended by demanding an immediate answer.

"By every post," Dickens wrote back to England, "letters on letters arrive, all about nothing. This man is offended because I won't live in his house, and that man is thoroughly disgusted because I won't go out more than four times in an evening."

Thackeray's "Thorn Letters."

Thackeray, much as he liked the writing of letters and delightfully as he wrote them, frequently squirmed in receiving them. There was a kind of an epistle which he called a "thorn letter," and these were in most cases of Irish origin, for though he married a wife half Irish and proclaimed a love for the sister island, his humor was of a quality that the Irish could not always understand. There was one Irishman who was in the habit of writing every little while promising an early call for the purpose of soundly thrashing the novelist. Then, when he wrote "Lovel, the Widower," Thackeray provoked correspondence like the following:

"Sir: I have just finished the first portion of your tale 'Lovel, the Widower,' and am much surprised at the unwarrantable strictures you pass therein on the corps de ballet.

"I have been for more than ten years connected with the theatrical profession, and I beg to assure you that the majority of the corps de ballet are virtuous, well conducted girls, and consequently that snug cottages are prior to the snarlings of dyspeptic libellers or the spiteful attacks and brutum fulmen of ephemeral authors."

Or:

"Sir: I have just read in the *Cornhill Magazine* for January the first portion of a tale written by you and entitled 'Lovel, the Widower.'

"In the production in question you employ all your malicious spite (and you have great capabilities that way) in trying to degrade the character of the corps de ballet. When you imply that the majority of ballet girls have villas taken for them in the Regent's Park I say you tell a deliberate falsehood.

"Having been brought up to the stage from infancy and though now an actress, having been seven years principal dancer at the opera, I am competent to speak on the subject. I am only surprised that so vile a libeller as yourself should be allowed to preside at the Dramatic Fund dinner. I think it would be much better if you were to reform your own life instead of telling lies of those who are immeasurably your superiors.

"Yours in supreme disgust,"

Whatever eccentric letters may have found their way to Bulwer-Lytton posterity is inclined to extend very little sympathy to the gifted author of "The Caxtons." For no letter that he ever received could have possibly been as extraordinary as the following which he himself indited in his courtship days:

"My Adored Poodle: Many, many thanks for oo darling letter. Me is so happy, me is wagging my tail and putting my ears down. Me is to meet oo to-morrow. O day of days! I cannot tell you how very, very happy you have made me. No my own love, don't come before twelve; but really I shall meet you! Oh, darling of darlings! . . . Oh, zoo love of loves, me is ready to leap out of my skin for joy! Twenty million kisses.

"And so they dressed my darling in white and black? O zoo darling! how like a poodle! And had oo oo's bootiful ears curled nicely, and did oo not look too pretty, and did not all the puppy dogs run after oo and tell oo what a darling oo was. Ah, me sends oo nine million kisses to be distributed as follows: 500,000 for oo bootiful mouth, 250,000 to oo right eye, 250,000 to oo left eye, 1,000,000 to oo dear neck, and the rest to be equally divided between oo arms and hands.

"Ten million more kisses, my own darling, for your letter which is just arrived. It is read, and now before it is answered, take the following (marks of kisses). Pray, darling, shall we not kiss prettily to-morrow, darling? (d) (a) (r) (l) (i) (n) (g)?

"Adieu, my own Rose, my life of life, very poodle of very poodles, adieu!

"Adieu, oo own idolatrous puppy.

"Ever my dearest, dearest, dearest, fondest, kindest, bootifulest, darlingest, angelest poodle. Oo own puppy."

It was a few years later that the lady so addressed wrote of the composer of the foregoing document:

"Upon his asking her with whom I was going to the christening at Mr. Fonblanque's that night, and I replying 'with Lady Stepney,' he then repeated as fast as he could, a dozen times running, 'My mother calls her that ugly old woman.' He then called out, 'Do you hear me, madam?' 'Of course I hear you.' 'Then why then—in—don't you answer me?' 'I did not think it required an answer.' 'D—— your soul, madam!' he exclaimed, seizing a carving knife (for we were at dinner, and he had told the servants to leave the room till he rang) and rushing at me, cried, 'I'll have you to know that whenever I do you the honor of addressing you, it requires an answer!' I said, 'For God's sake, take care of what you are about, Edward!' He then dropped the knife and, springing on me, made his great teeth meet in my cheek, and the blood spurted over me. The agony was so great that my screams brought the servants back; and presently Creason, the cook, seized him by the collar, but he broke away from him and seizing one of the footmen's hats in the hall, rushed down Picadilly."

But to come down to a less impassioned age of authors' correspondence.

Leaving the Flirt in Doubt.

Perhaps the most extraordinary series of letters ever received by Booth Tarkington was provoked by "The Flirt." The exact relations existing between the heroine of that story, Cora Madison, and Corliss were shrouded, so far as the actual text went, in a certain doubt. No sooner had the book appeared than the author began receiving daily letters, all from women, insisting curiously on further enlightenment. In every case Mr. Tarkington discreetly replied that he knew no more about the matter than did his correspondents.

At one time Stewart Edward White considered the most extraordinary development of the letters received from unknown writers to be the number of doubles that a man possesses scattered about the civilized globe. Once a letter in a feminine hand and with an English postmark rather startled the author of "The Blazed Trail." It read, in part:

"I believe it must be you who sent me the lines on a Christmas card. Only the other day I came across the lines in the (one of his books), and so now I know you are. I have often and often wanted to say something to you, and now I find you wrote it, part of it, before I felt it, and long before I thought of it, for it took me some time to know what I did feel. Among other things they taught me that 'without love each kiss adds to the woman's regard for the man, but takes away from his desire for her.' And I would like you to know that there are some women whom it hurts forever most bitterly and makes them feel too cheap and nasty for words. One feels so mean to all the ordinary men who have really cared for one. I never knew quite how it happened at that garden party."

Neither did Mr. White, not having the slightest knowledge of the garden party in question, nor of the lady who so romantically wrote about it.

George Barr McCutcheon is one popular author who has learned that there are occasions when the unknown correspondent comes out best in the exchange of friendly hostilities. There was a cowboy living in Arizona, forty miles from a post office or bookstore, who delighted in the romance of the Graustarck novels. He learned the author's address from a Chicago travelling man who happened to be in that part of the country and wrote a long letter in the course of which he said that he was eager to read "The Sherrods," which had just been published. He had ridden forty miles, going and coming, twice a week for a month, but had been unable to secure the book at the nearest town. He was writing to ask if the author would mail him a copy if he would send on the price. Mr. McCutcheon, being in those days susceptible to flattery, sent him a copy with his compliments and told him not to mind the price. A month later came the following:

"I don't wonder you are happy to give it away. You don't expect people to buy it, do you? I'm much obliged to you for giving it to me for nothing but even at that I think there is some change coming to me."

That hurt; and Mr. McCutcheon made the mistake of sending on a dollar and fifty cents in stamps and asking if that settlement made author and reader square. The cowboy replied that he could use the stamps to great advantage in warning his friends not to read the book. Mr. McCutcheon had no further retort.

Many of the readers of Mr. McCutcheon's novels formerly took it for granted that Graustark actually existed and many were the letters of inquiry about the money, language, customs and location of the principality. A woman in Cleveland requested directions for reaching the place by rail after arriving in Europe. Her daughter was an invalid and she was quite sure that the climate of Graustark would be beneficial. Another woman wrote to say that her husband was consumptive and that she felt that if they could rent or buy a house on the mountain side in Edelweiss his health might be restored. One day a telegram received by Mr. McCutcheon read as follows: "To decide a bet, what is the quickest way to get to Graustark?" That telegram was from the East. Cincinnati went it one better. There was found a cynic who complained of the hour mentioned in Graustark for the departure of a certain passenger train. The author had missed the correct time by a full sixty minutes and such carelessness spoiled the book for the travelled and discriminating reader. San Francisco apparently outdid even Cincinnati, for a woman from the Golden Gate city wrote the author:

"I have a friend here who has travelled extensively. She says she has been in Graustark twice, and loves it very much. Your description of the country is excellent, she says. We expect to go abroad this fall, and I am writing to ask you how to reach Graustark. My friend is in the East, and I cannot find the place on the map. She says she has seen the Princess Yetive and gone through the castle."

Once Mr. McCutcheon was routed out of bed late at night by the following telegram: "Please send me your autograph at once by wire."

Edwin Lefevre, the author of "Wall Street Stories," "The Golden Flood" and "Sampson Rock of Wall Street," confesses that the first letter that he received as an author was one written by himself. It was addressed in care of the editor of the afternoon paper for which he was then working. The letter told how much the writer had enjoyed that "special" on the banana industry. It was, the writer said, the best monograph extant on that important subject. The editor, after reading, called Mr. Lefevre.

"Here is a highly encomiastic letter about your damned banana story."

"Yes," replied Mr. Lefevre. "You see that—"

"Whom did you get to write it?" pursued the editor coldly.

"Nobody, but *that* would make a good story—the young author who is a disguised hand sends letters to the editor telling the great pleasure the perusal—"

"You will continue to enlighten the readers of this paper," went on the editor, "as to the latest quotations on butter, eggs, cheese, petroleum, fertilizers and pig iron, and everything else that will fit in the commercial page."

A Request From Toledo.

But here is a genuine contribution to Mr. Lefevre's letter box, from Toledo, Ohio.

"I have read your Wall Street stories with much interest. Keep it up. There is one story you ought to write about a man in this office that we call Willie the Duke. He always brags when he wins, but when he loses it is always the broker's fault. He owes us some money, and we can't sue because everything is in his wife's name. He is a lightweight and he is full of hot air. He therefore weighs seventeen pounds less than a toothpick. You ought to write him up. Let us know in what number it appears."

That letter was the first note in a one sided correspondence on the subject that lasted more than a year. The writer evidently travelled for his firm, for Mr. Lefevre received letters on hotel stationery from various cities, every letter offering a fresh suggestion and inquiring how the story was coming along and when and where it was likely to appear.

Mr. Lefevre's first genuine letter from a stranger was sent from a summer resort in Massachusetts. It read:

"Will you pardon an Englishwoman sojourning in your country if she ventures to request your autograph? She has read your stories and has greatly enjoyed them."

The name signed was a very pretty one. The author wrote back that she had doubtless made a mistake, that she could not have enjoyed the stories, because she was English and a woman. But that if she wished to do a good deed would she permit him to name the heroine of his next novel after her? Consent came at once:

"I have read your Wall Street stories, all of them, and I've enjoyed them all. A friend explained some of the points, but not many, notwithstanding my sex and nationality. As for using my name for your heroine, you are welcome to it. It will not be mine much longer. I am to be married next week."

The first announcement of Herman Knickerbocker Viele's "The last of the Knickerbockers" took the form of a visiting card, conventionally engraved, which read:

Mrs. Valentine Van Wandelser
Miss Van Wandelser
At Home.
The Last of the Knickerbockers.

The address given was that of a well known bookseller in Union Square, New York. Not a few of what since the days of the late Ward McAllister has been known as the "Four Hundred" solemnly and punctiliously responded by enclosing their own cards in acknowledgement.

The book brought other complications. Mr. Viele had carefully chosen "up-State" names for his Knickerbockers, but that did not prevent an onslaught from Manhattan Dutchmen. "Peter was my great grandfather," wrote one, "he married a Van X and not a Van der Y." Another said: "Aunt Caroline is now too old to set you right, but I have often heard her tell——"

An author who wishes to hear the postman's whistle without inward uneasiness cannot be too careful in verifying apparently trivial statements in his manuscript. Mr. Viele's "The Inn of the Silver Moon," contained a song which the author chose to call an old provincial ditty. He was unaware that there were people who collected old provincial ditties. These, some in good faith and some in irony, wrote demanding the original. They begged the author to produce the music. To crown all he was invited to a dinner of the New York chapter of the Felibres of Provence. "Which only shows," was Mr. Viele's later comment, "that it is never safe to monkey with poetic buzzsaws."

A stranger once wrote to Miss Carolyn Wells, outlining his preconceived notion of her working methods:

"I picture thus the manner of your average day. You wake. 'Ha,' you say, 'to-day will I write much nonsense. I will sit at my big desk and jingle a few lines—just enough to keep in practice. Then I will dash off a burlesque novel, a short story for girls, a shorter story for boys, write divers letters to members of the Mermaid Club, call on Mrs. Prunes, who has such a lovely kitten, browse at the book shops and lunch at the club. Afterward I will call on 780,000 publishers and leave each a few manuscripts. By that time I must run to the matinee. Then I will have tea with Oliver Herford and talk over the illustrations for the forthcoming ninety-four books, then I will catch the 5:22 ferry from the Twenty-third street station and go home to Rahway.'"

From Oliver Herford Miss Wells once received a drawing of a group of kittens accompanied by the words:

"I send you a wreath of kittens. If I were a poet I would write a poem about how I walked in the kitten garden and found a kitten tree and gathered all the kits to make this kitten wreath for thee."

Later another drawing, showing what he called a kitteniere, was accompanied by:

"Do you remember the kitten wreath I sent you once? That was a great kitten year. Now the trees are bare and only one little kitten have I been able to shake down for you.

"I sent thee once a kitten wreath—
Now all the trees are bare,
And I can scarcely find enough
To make a kitteniere."

A Rebuke From Harvard.

When Edward W. Townsend launched "Chimmie Fadden" upon the scene of fiction he unknowingly invited future correspondence of a troublesome nature. The gorgeous slang of the little Bowery boy created a widespread impression that his creator must also have been Bowery-derived, and led to complications when Mr. Townsend turned to fiction dealing with other conditions of life. Once, in a short story, he made use of certain adventures he had shared with a couple of Harvard men while travelling in the Hawaiian Islands. That provoked a letter of stern rebuke from a Harvard undergraduate. That the author should presume to speak of men and measures not of the Bowery made the undergraduate sad; that he should attempt to tell what a Harvard man would do under any circumstance was a piece of impertinence that could not be encountered without indignant protest.

When he was a very young man Mr. Townsend reported for a newspaper a law trial famous throughout the mining states and territories, which revealed that a mine swindle had been perpetrated through the "salting" of a bag of ore samples by the injection of a solution of gold. The cautious expert, who had personally broken down the samples of ore, had placed the bag containing them under his pillow at night, but the needle of the syringe had got there just the same. Years later Mr. Townsend used the incident in a magazine story. From a stranger whose letterhead proclaimed him a metallurgist and assayer he received a communication informing him that such a device was a chemical impossibility, and warning him to avoid in future such technicalities.

Of a whimsical nature was the letter Mr. Townsend once received from a New York merchant asking if the copyright covering the books prevented the use of a menu one of them contained. Assured that the menus of fiction were free to all he explained that he wanted to give a certain chef an order to duplicate a dinner described in "Days Like These," but that a painful experience he had had with the law prompted him to ask the author's preliminary consent.

Probably never in the history of authorship has a writer's letter box been so full as that of Rudyard Kipling when he was lying desperately ill at the Hotel Grenoble in New York. From all over the country, and indeed from all over the world, were those letters of generous sympathy. They touched Kipling deeply. Never again was he to be the somewhat acrimonious correspondent of the early days. Once before a flippant stranger had written: "I read that you are paid at the rate of a shilling a word for your work. I am enclosing an order for a shilling. Please send a sample." Kipling did. His reply was "Thanks."

"Sam" Vauclain's Career

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optimist who always is chasing rainbows.

"Any alarm over depression is without foundation," he averred. "Any business can readjust itself within three months. Successful business men must always be prepared to meet new conditions. There is no need to worry about the labor programme, if that problem is handled through the earnest cooperation of employer and employee. The employee must understand you. He must understand your business. He must be in sympathy with your purposes, and there must be a mutual understanding if the interests of both are to be best served."

Nor has Mr. Vauclain any qualm about Bolshevism in America.

"There is no need to worry about Bolshevism or any other ism," he declares.

No better tribute has been paid to the genius of Sam Vauclain—succinctly summarizing the thought of those who know him intimately—than this from William I. Schaffer, Attorney General of Pennsylvania and a close friend of the locomotive builder.

"When I see the great locomotives tear through the night," says Mr. Schaffer, "when I hear them shriek their songs, it seems to me they say: 'I am the spirit of Samuel Vauclain!' The shells that soared over the enemy's trenches, dealing death and destruction, sang: 'I am the spirit of Samuel Vauclain!' The huge batteries that were his own creation thundered: 'We are the spirit of Samuel Vauclain!' It was this spirit which more than anything else won our struggle. It is this spirit we all honor with humility."

And that's why they call him "Uncle Sam" Vauclain.